

# ***Royal Air Force***

## ***Old Catton***

(USAAF Camp Thomas – Station AAF 108)



## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

In the very early days of the Royal Air Force there were a number of small temporary airfields situated around Norfolk. Then during the expansion period of the 1930's the War Department began building more permanent airfields and non flying Stations around the country. Norwich already had a small airfield at Mousehold (also known as RAF Mousehold) which was home to No.40 Elementary Reserve Flying Training School and by 1938 RAF Horsham St Faith (Norwich International Airport) was also in the process of being built. Situated between these two well known airfields was a small non-flying Station called RAF Old Catton. Why this small unit was called Old Catton is not known as it was actually situated on Constitution Hill in the parish of New Sprowston but it was adjacent to the boundaries of both Norwich and Old Catton.

Very little official information concerning RAF Old Catton is available from the time it was built in late 1938 or early 1939 until the end of World War 2. It is possible that RAF Old Catton was originally established as part of the Air Defence Network known as the Dowding System. This system was established just before World War 2 as a ground controlled interception network controlling the UK airspace by collating information from Chain Home units, Radar Stations and the Observer Corps. The information received was then filtered down from a Central Control to Sector Operations Rooms controlling the Fighter Stations.



1944 Aerial View RAF Old Catton

## RAF Old Catton

During the major expansion of the RAF in the 1930's the War Office purchased approximately 10 acres of land on Constitution Hill Norwich. This land was adjacent to the boundaries of Meadow House (now Catton Vets) and the School Lane Sprowston Brickworks. This small but autonomous RAF Station, although situated in New Sprowston, was named RAF Old Catton but in 1942 it transferred to the USAAF and was for a period known as Camp Thomas (Station AAF 108). After the war it reverted back to RAF Old Catton and in May 1947 control was transferred from the War Office to Reserve Command and the station was eventually parented by RAF Horsham St Faith.

There were two entrances to the site both of which were located on Constitution Hill. The Entrance to the camp opened up to the main road on the site which ran approximately 400 yards (366 meters) in a straight line to the eastern boundary. The majority of buildings on the site were situated along both sides of this short road which is now part of Chartwell Road. The second entrance was mainly for vehicles and ran parallel to the Meadow House boundary leading directly to the Motor Transport Section. Between these two roads was a two acre sports field which was bounded by Constitution Hill and a small road leading from the Motor Transport Section to the main camp buildings.



Main Entrance-ATC HQ-Mess/NAAFI-Living Quarters



Main Entrance-Guardroom and Station HQ

All buildings on the station were of wooden construction built and erected to military specifications by the local manufacturers Boulton and Paul Ltd. On the northern side of the entrance road was the Equipment Stores and Office, the all ranks Mess and NAAFI and the airmen's living quarters which were situated adjacent to the eastern boundary. The living quarters consisted of an Ablution Block and three Barrack Blocks with accommodation for Senior Non-Commissioned Officers (SNCO's) and airmen. The Officer's quarters were situated on the southern side of the road opposite the airmen's quarters. The remaining buildings along this road were the Station Headquarters, on either side of which were Administrative Facilities consisting of offices, lecture rooms, an Operations Room and Signals unit.

Just inside the main entrance on the right hand side was the Guardroom and a small 4 bed Sick Quarters. The Motor Transport Section was situated close to the boundary with Meadow House and consisted of a timber office and three garages plus an open sided covered vehicle shelter. The station did not have any petrol or oil storage tank facilities so all fuel required by any vehicles on site was contained in cans. None of the buildings had central heating and if any rooms required heating this was done by small coal burning tortoise stoves. If any parade was held on the station it is assumed that this would have taken place either on the road in front of the station headquarters or possibly on the Motor Transport area as there was no official parade ground.

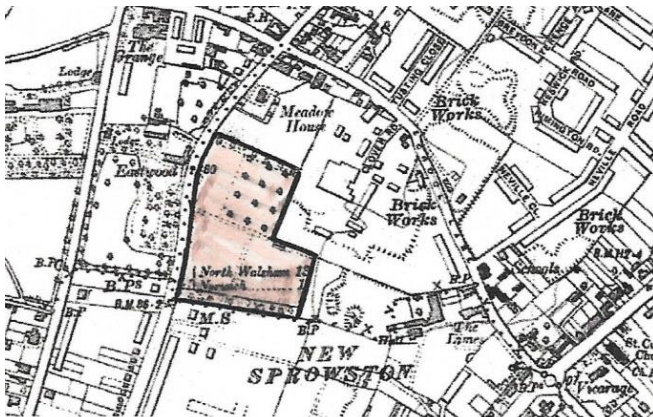
Being an Air Ministry installation there would also have been provision for staff to shelter in the event of an air raid and it is believed that the station had three shelters possibly of the Stanton type. These shelters were made of steel reinforced concrete segments which were bolted together and partly buried in the ground with a suitably screened entrance and covered with soil and grass for concealment. One of these was probably situated at the eastern end of the station close to the officers and all ranks accommodation, one near the all ranks mess and one close to the Motor Transport section.

As can be seen from the 1944 aerial photograph, the unit consisted of very few buildings and was probably the smallest autonomous RAF station in the UK. The total staffing establishment required to maintain and undertake the various duties on the station was around 50 personnel. Unlike larger RAF Stations which had

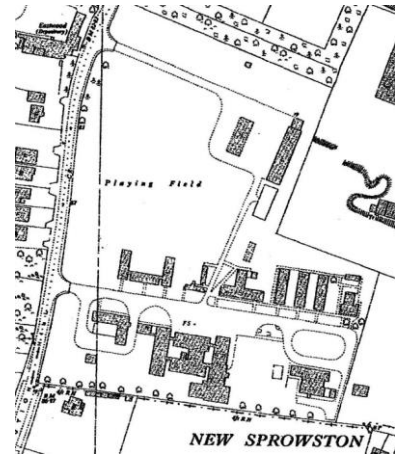


separate Mess facilities for Officers, Senior NCOs and Airmen, only the Officers had separate accommodation which was situated close to the eastern boundary of the camp. Catering for all personnel was in a separate all ranks Mess which could provide separate seating accommodation for 10 officers, 8 Senior NCO's and up to 32 airmen at a single sitting. This building also contained a recreational area operated by the Navy Army Air Forces Institution (NAAFI).

There is no official information as to when RAF Old Catton was actually built and the area on which it was eventually established was still open fields on the 1938 Ordnance Survey map. However, information contained in an Air Force List seems to indicate that it was part of No.6 Group in November 1938 whereas other sources indicate that the facilities were initially placed on a Care and Maintenance basis, with only a small Meteorological Office on site. How long this latter situation prevailed is not known.



1938 OS Map of site for RAF Old Catton

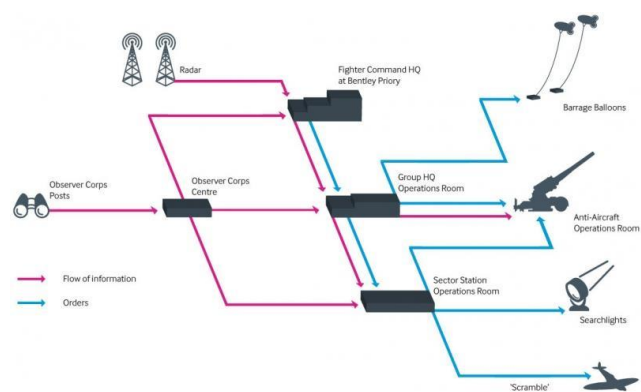


1956 OS Map of RAF Old Catton

As previously mentioned RAF Old Catton may originally have been established to form part of the Dowding Air Defence System which relied on a dedicated teleprinter and telephone network to obtain information from Chain Home Radio Direction Finding (RDF) Stations, Radar Units and Observer Corps Centres. With Chain Home stations at RAF Stoke Holy Cross and RAF West Beckham plus No.16 Group Observer Corps Centre situated in the Norwich telephone exchange, it is possible that RAF Old Catton may have been built as part of this system. The fact that RAF Old Catton was established with a small Operations Room and ancillary facilities including a Signals Unit, gives some credence to this theory. However, with RAF Coltishall and Horsham St Faith on the doorstep it may also have been considered that accommodation might be required at some time for either a temporary or permanent Operations Room and this eventually proved correct.



Typical Chain Home Radio Direction Finding Station



Dowding Air Defence System

The Dowding System consisted of dividing the UK into four Fighter Groups (Numbers 10, 11, 12, 13) and within each Group there were several Sectors which controlled RAF airfields and their squadrons. Radar and Radio Direction Finding (RDF) stations would pass details of enemy aircraft movements to the Fighter Command Headquarters Filter Operations Room where their direction was monitored on a large scale map plotting table. Once the direction of the incoming enemy aircraft had been determined, the appropriate Fighter Group was informed and they in turn passed on the information to their appropriate Sector Control units. The Sector Control plotters were also receiving information of any incoming enemy aircraft by

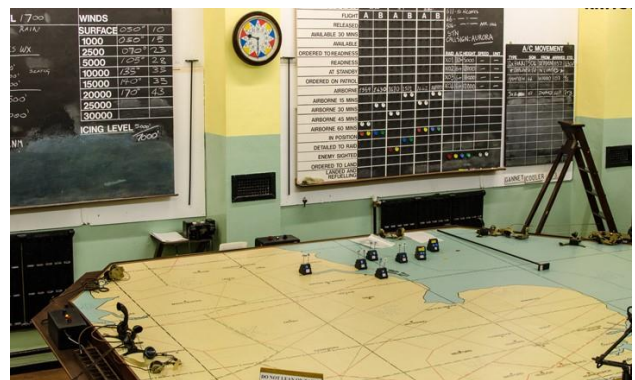
telephone and would be plotting them on their table so that as soon as the Sector Controllers were requested to scramble defending aircraft they knew which squadrons to inform.

## Operations Room

In early 1940 a campaign was launched at the Odeon cinema in Norwich to recruit personnel from the Norfolk area for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) to work in the Sector Operations Room at RAF Coltishall. Those who volunteered were taken to RAF Coltishall and put into uniform and without any initial service training were assigned to the Operations Room where they were trained as Plotters and Tellers. It was soon considered that the Sector facilities at RAF Coltishall were inadequate and also vulnerable to enemy attack, so in 1940 a decision was made to transfer operations to an emergency Operations Room at RAF Old Catton. Within a few weeks all the necessary equipment including telephone and teleprinter communications facilities were in place and the operations room became active. As living accommodation on the station was limited, the Duty Watch Controllers and Plotters were transported daily to RAF Old Catton with meals being taken in the station all ranks Mess.

The Operations Room measured approximately 12 metres by 10 metres and together with its ancillary facilities and equipment was situated in a building at the rear of the east wing of the Station Headquarters building. It is not known if this building was erected as part of the original station complex or whether it was added in 1940 to specifically provide alternative accommodation for the Coltishall Sector Operations Room. As this room was housed in a single storey timber building there was insufficient height for the Controllers to be accommodated on a balcony so they were seated on a raised platform with a panelled front along one wall of the room overlooking the Plotting Table

The layout of the Operations Room would probably have been much the same as other sector units consisting of a plotting table and chalk boards displaying meteorological information and the various fighter squadrons under their command. Because Coltishall Sector was part of Fighter Command No. 12 Group which was responsible for the aerial defence of Lincolnshire, the Midlands, Norfolk, and North Wales, it is presumed that the Map Plotting Table in use would have covered most of this area and possibly some of No. 11 and No. 13 Group areas as well. Bearing in mind that the Operations Room was not very large, it is presumed that the plotting table would probably have been manned by a maximum of six WAAF Plotters at any one time. The Plotters would be receiving information from Chain Home Radio Direction Finding (RDF) Stations and Observer Corps observation posts via their Filter Room and plotting the position of enemy activity on the table.



Typical WW2 Sector Operations Room and Plotting Table

Overlooking the Plotting Table there could have been up to six Controllers and four Liaison Officers each responsible for carrying out a specific role. There would have been a Senior Controller who used the information on the table in order to direct squadrons into action from the sector airfields and also an Assistant Controller who maintained communication with squadrons at other airfields. Two Deputy Controllers would have been available one specifically in communication with other Sectors and one co-ordinating other possible situations. Alongside the Controllers there could also have been two Liaison Officers, one who maintained direct communication with the 16 Group Observer Corps Headquarters in Norwich and the other in contact with Anti-Aircraft Command. There may also have been two other Liaison

Officers (Ops1 and Ops2) available, one in permanent contact with the RAF Fighter Group Headquarters and one who scrambled the pilots.

There would also have been the well known Operations Room clock which was a fundamental part of the Integrated Air Defence System (IADS). The clock face was marked with red, yellow and blue triangular segments each of which covered a period of five minutes. The dial was also marked with an outer 12 hour clock ring and an inner 24 hour clock ring. When aircraft position counters were placed on the plotting table its colour corresponded to the colour indicated by the minute hand at the time the incoming enemy aircraft were first sighted. This enabled Controllers to see the aircraft direction and the age of the information was apparent from the colour of the counter.



Typical Ops Room Clock



Typical aircraft Position Counters

Because the Chain Home Stations could only detect incoming aircraft in front of their antennas, the Air Ministry had been developing Ground Controlled Interception (GCI) Radars since 1940. These new Radars could detect, locate and track aircraft and provide the inland coverage which the Chain Home system was unable to do. With this new equipment becoming available the Air Ministry began looking for a site to establish a new Air Defence Station in Norfolk and by September 1941 land had been obtained at Neatishead and the first secret Radar System was installed. RAF Neatishead was initially known as an Intermediate Ground Controlled Interception Station and mobile Radars were installed as a temporary measure. These were eventually replaced by permanent Type 7 Search Radar and Type 13 Height Radar installations. By January 1943 the unit had been developed into a Final Ground Control Intercept Station and was one of only 12 units in the UK fully equipped for Fighter and Searchlight Control.

With the introduction of these new Radars and the associated Ground Controlled Interception System coming into operation, the existing Operations Room and systems at Old Catton were by 1943 most probably in need of upgrading. Because of the limited space available within this room it would have been difficult to make alterations to the existing facilities and layout which meant that a new Operations area would have to be considered. As RAF Old Catton was a small compact station, space was not available for the construction of a specialised building on the base at that time so other alternatives were obviously explored. Fortunately the Air Ministry had requisitioned Stratton Strawless Hall in the early 1940's and this was considered to be a suitable place for a new Main Operations building to be constructed.



The new Operations Block constructed at Stratton Strawless Hall



This eventually resulted in a new two storey building being constructed as an extension to Camp 'O' Stratton Strawless Hall containing an up to date Operations Room with two balconies together with all the ancillary communications facilities. Although this new Operations Room had all the appropriate facilities, emergency GPO communication lines were also installed so that full communications could be maintained through the RAF Old Catton Signals Section Defence Teleprinter Network.

Once the new building had been constructed the RAF Old Catton Operations Room was closed down and the Coltishall Sector Control moved to Stratton Strawless Hall and commenced operations from there in June 1943. As far as is known the Operations Room may have been used by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing as a War Room during their period at Old Catton but after they left was not used again until the Cold War era when 3620 Royal Auxiliary Air Force Fighter Control Unit (FCU) was formed there.

## Signals Section

Considering the communications technology available today, during WW2 the main method of communication between military establishments was carried out by telephone or teleprinters. These were connected to networks of dedicated General Post Office (GPO) landlines connected to Military operated switchboards. The signals section was also part of the Defence Teleprinter Network (DTN) and was one of the many small switchboard Teleprinter Terminals around the country feeding into the larger switching centres. The RAF Old Catton Terminal was connected to the Newmarket Signals Centre and there were also dedicated incoming lines for teleprinter communications from the many airfields situated in Norfolk.

The Signals Section was accommodated in the Station Headquarters building which also contained Offices and Lecture rooms, GPO Apparatus Room, Workshop facilities, Telephone Exchange and Teleprinter section. The unit was responsible for the operation of the Telephone Exchange and operation of Teleprinter communications equipment and also undertaking Teleprinter Voice Frequency training courses for operators at the local airfields. It is presumed that the telephone requirements of the Operations Room would consist of dedicated GPO lines directly connected to the various Group, Filter, Observer and airfield locations and as it was only a small station, the number of telephone extensions and outgoing lines required for normal use was limited. The Telephone Exchange was therefore equipped with a manual PMBX 1A switchboard which could cater for up to 70 extensions and 10 outgoing lines, but it is not known whether this was a two or three position switchboard.



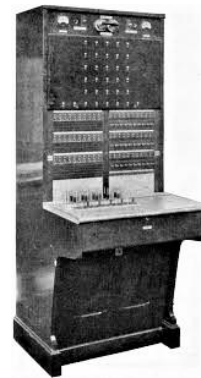
Three Position Manual PMBX 1A

Due to the lack of information regarding RAF Old Catton it is difficult to know exactly what equipment the Signals Section would be using. Bearing in mind the unit was a Teleprinter Terminal for signals traffic emanating from RAF airfields at Attlebridge, Bungay, Hardwick, Hethel, Horsham St Faith, Shipdham, Tibenham and Wendling, the teleprinter unit is believed to have been quite large. In order to cope with the signals traffic from these stations the signals unit would most likely have had a No.13 type Teleprinter Switchboard which was designed specifically for small switching centres. This is similar in layout to a normal telephone switchboard but with a display panel giving a visual indication of any transmission fault. The operator would have had a separate dedicated teleprinter table with a No.7B page or tape machine.

It is known that there were two teleprinters on the unit specifically for Meteorological traffic which were part of the network linking many units around the UK all of which could be connected to a control station for simultaneous reception of weather information. It is possible that there could have been six to eight additional teleprinters and ancillary equipment installed to cater for training Voice Frequency operators as well as normal communications traffic from the Operations Room and local airfields.



Typical Teleprinter position



Teleprinter Switchboard No.13

Close to the signals section there would have been a GPO Frame Room containing the dedicated landline circuits and apparatus necessary for the transmission of all telephone and telex traffic to and from military establishments. This equipment would have been installed and maintained by the General Post Office (GPO) and their engineers would be working closely with the RAF signals operators and technicians to ensure that network communications were not interrupted. If an equipment malfunction occurred then the Norwich GPO Engineers would be advised to deal with the problem as there were no GPO engineers permanently on site. From 1943 onwards there was also a small Junction Box situated just inside the Main Gate containing the incoming lines from the Operations Room at Stratton Strawless Hall which were constantly monitored by GPO engineers to ensure communications would not be interrupted. The GPO allocated a code to each military establishment where they were responsible for maintaining telephone and telex equipment and RAF Old Catton was given the code QNWH.

During the early war years many GPO engineers were called up for service with the armed forces which resulted in the Engineer-in Chief at Norwich asking local RAF Signals Officers for volunteers to undertake the repair and maintenance of RAF teleprinters. The request was successful and resulted in airmen undertaking a four week course at the GPO Training School in Cambridge but it is not known if any personnel from the signals section were involved.



Signal Section Stamps

## USAAF Station 108 Camp Thomas

In January 1942 the US Army Air Corps activated the Eighth Air Force as VIII Bomber Command at Hunter Airfield in Savannah Georgia for duty in England and a small detachment under the command of General Ira C Eaker was sent to the UK to prepare for the arrival of the Army Air Force in Great Britain (AAIGB). This became the first American Air Headquarters in Europe and was established at RAF Daws Hill on the outskirts of London on 23 February 1942. On arrival in the UK arrangements had been made for General Eaker and his small staff to proceed to the headquarters of RAF Bomber Command for the purpose of understudying its organisation and systems. Recommendations were then made for the training, equipment, and deployment of two heavy bombardment groups (No.1 and 2d) which Washington had earmarked for early movement to the United Kingdom.

General Eaker also had the responsibility for making preparations to receive the VIII Bomber Command, but because of the variety and multiplicity of Army Air Force activities in England he was directed to establish some central control. As a result the Detachment Headquarters of the VIII Bomber Command under his command assumed control of all U.S. Army air organisations in the British Isles on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1942. By mid-



June the VIII Bomber Command had developed the necessary systems for the control of combat operations and Brampton Grange in Northamptonshire was allocated as the headquarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bombardment Wing and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing headquarters was to be established at RAF Old Catton. All B17 Flying Fortress units in East Anglia would be under the command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bombardment Wing and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing would be responsible for the B24 Liberator units which would be based mainly in Norfolk. The Commanding Officer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing, Col. Newton Longfellow, actually landed at Prestwick on the 27<sup>th</sup> July which was the day when both units were fully activated in the United States.

Records concerning dates and locations of the various USAAF units during the war years were often confused and this was especially true in respect of the name Old Catton. When RAF Old Catton was allocated to the VIII Air Force it officially became Station AAF 108 Camp Thomas but for some reason this name was rarely used. Most available records refer to the station as just Old Catton without even the prefix of RAF. It is believed that in some instances the name Old Catton also became associated with RAF Horsham St Faith as the eastern boundary of the airfield was in the parish of Old Catton and to add more confusion, the village sign was “moved” and eventually took pride of place outside the Officers Mess. With the village sign in such a prominent position the name Old Catton could quite easily have become associated with the airfield so it is no wonder that locations were often misrepresented. .



Village Sign outside Officers Mess  
RAF Horsham St Faith

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing

Although Col. Newton Longfellow arrived in England as Commanding Officer of 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing his appointment only lasted one month as he was appointed to command No. 1 Bombardment Wing at Brampton Grange and Col. James P Hodges was appointed to command the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing. The Wing was officially activated in the UK on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1942 with its Headquarters at RAF Old Catton but it is not known when Col. Hodges and the first small detachment of staff arrived in England.



Brig. Gen Newton Longfellow



Maj. Gen James P Hodges

RAF personnel continued to operate Old Catton and domestic accommodation on the station remained for their personnel. Personnel of the Bombardment Wing were accommodated at an additional domestic site situated at RAF Horsham St Faith on the south side of Fifers Lane adjacent to St Faiths Road. It is presumed that RAF Old Catton was initially chosen as the base for the Bombardment Wing Headquarters as it was a

fully autonomous station and was ideally situated in close proximity to a number of airfields which had been earmarked for use by the Eighth Air Force. It also had telephone and telex communications with these airfields which would be a necessity when the US Bomber Groups arrived in England.

The advance detachment spent several weeks getting systems and communication channels in order while awaiting the arrival in England of the main Headquarters staff personnel and the various air and ground echelons that were allocated to the Wing. It is believed that the Bombardment Wing structure consisted of four sections Command, Operations, Intelligence and Casualty all of which would require space at Old Catton. It is not known how many personnel were actually allocated to the new Wing, but apart from the clerks, stenographers, and truck drivers they also had linotype operators which would indicate that there was probably a printing section associated with the unit as well. As all personnel were accommodated at RAF Horsham St Faith they were transported on a daily basis to RAF Old Catton.



Additional domestic site at Horsham St Faith

One of the first officers to join the advanced detachment was 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Raymond Strong, who in civilian life had been an accomplished shorthand typist. Shortly after he arrived in October 1942 and because of his civilian qualifications and a shortage of staff, he was requested by the Personnel Officer to assist the Deputy Chief of Staff Major Fredrick Bryan in the Command Section doing a job that would, in normal circumstances, have been undertaken by an enlisted serviceman. He agreed to help out and this was obviously a good move on his part as he was eventually promoted to Major and became Adjutant General of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Division.

There were fourteen airfields around Norfolk earmarked for use by the USAAF but only three B24 Liberator Bombardment Groups had arrived in England in 1942. These were the 44<sup>th</sup> BG which was stationed at Shipdham, the 93<sup>rd</sup> BG at Hardwick and the 389<sup>th</sup> BG at Hethel and they were the first B24 Liberator units to come under the control of 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing when it became fully operational. It was not until early 1943 that the remaining B24 Bombardment Groups actually began to arrive in England and were allocated to the various airfields around Norfolk.



2nd Bombardment Wing Officers-Old Catton



2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing-Staff-Old Catton

The first three platoons of the USAAF Women's Army Corps (WAC) also arrived in England in 1943 and they were initially accommodated in the Mayflower Hotel in London where they were eventually told their final destinations. One platoon which included telephone and telex operators, clerks, stenographers and drivers was told that their final destination was to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing at Old Catton. It is believed that

this initial platoon consisted of approximately 30 WAC's who were accommodated at RAF Horsham St Faith and transported to RAF Old Catton each day. A few days after arrival they were on parade outside the Officers accommodation at RAF Old Catton where they were welcomed by Colonel James P Hodges



WAC's being welcomed to Old Catton



From early 1943 a large number of the heavy VIII Air Force Bomber Squadrons began arriving in the UK many of which would be located at various airfields in Norfolk and would come under the control of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing. With this influx of units it is possible that consideration had already been given to relocating the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing as it would require additional personnel in order to operate efficiently or it may have been because accommodation at Old Catton was becoming over crowded due to a new RAF Liaison Unit being formed there on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1943.

At the beginning of the War many Stately Homes and County Halls had been requisitioned across the country by the War Office to accommodate units of the Army and RAF and Ketteringham Hall was one of these. The Hall was allocated to the VIII Air Force probably for possible use as a USAAF Wing Headquarters as it was situated in close proximity to many of the local airfields. This came to fruition in 1943 when work began to transform the building and grounds for occupation by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing. Internal alterations were required to provide suitable accommodation for the Command, Operations and Intelligence Sections of the unit and within the grounds of the Hall a large number of various sized Nissen Huts also had to be erected for Living Quarters, Mess Halls, Offices and Recreation facilities and the Chapel was converted into an Operations Room. When it eventually became operational there were around 700 personnel on site including 300 WAC's.

During the period that Ketteringham Hall was being prepared for occupation, accommodation at Old Catton must have been at a premium and this may have been the reason that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing was relocated to RAF Hethel on the 14<sup>th</sup> September 1943. This temporary move did not last very long as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing moved to its final destination Ketteringham Hall in December 1943 where it remained for the rest of the war. In January 1945 the unit was renamed and became the now well known 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Division.



Ketteringham Hall



2<sup>nd</sup> Air Division Staff –Ketteringham Hall



## RAF 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing Substitution Unit

At the beginning of WW2 there were a large number of airfields being constructed in the East of England many of which were in the county of Norfolk and once completed were allocated to the appropriate RAF Bomber or Fighter Groups. When the USAAF VIII Air Force began arriving in England in 1942 many of these bases were subsequently allocated for use by the two heavy American Bombardment Groups that were scheduled to operate from the UK. On arrival in England the American units were dependant for a long period on the RAF providing essential services including Airfield Defence, Metrological, Intelligence, Communications and other services at all these airfields.

The RAF had developed elaborate and extremely effective communications and radar systems for the control of air traffic over the UK and it was essential that British and American forces should operate under one control. Much of the equipment and procedures of the VIII Air Force were not compatible with that existing at the various RAF airfields they were to occupy and it was necessary for training and modifications to be undertaken in order to fit into the highly efficient British system. Because of this incompatibility the VIII Air Force units had to initially rely on the assistance of the RAF until American units had developed appropriate services of their own. As the VIII Air Force developed their own installations and modifications and taken appropriate action to adjust to the already established British systems, the majority of RAF services were withdrawn from the various airfields.

Although the personnel were withdrawn, RAF Substitution Units were formed around the country with detachments of Liaison Staff assisting at the various USAAF airfields and depots. It is not known what Liaison Personnel actually remained with the USAAF in Norfolk, but as airfield communications were mainly through the Defence Teleprinter Network (DTN) of GPO dedicated telex and telephone lines, it would appear that they were mostly small detachments of RAF Signals Operators and Technicians. The Signals Section at Old Catton was a DTN Teleprinter Terminal operated by RAF personnel with telex connections to all the airfields under the control of the VIII Air Force 2d Bombardment Wing and these were probably integrated into the Substitution Unit when it was formed.

The Headquarters of the RAF 2nd Bombardment Wing Substitution Unit was formed at RAF Old Catton on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1943 to War Office establishment number WAR/BC/311. It was to be responsible for the administration, discipline, pay and equipment of all RAF and WAAF personnel at the Headquarters of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing VIII Bomber Command and the eight stations under the control of the Bombardment Wing. The airfields allocated to this unit were Attlebridge, Bungay, Hardwick, Hethel, Horsham St Faith, Wendling and Tibenham.

The Liaison personnel situated at the Headquarters and stations of the VIII Air Force 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing who were on the establishment of Headquarters RAF Bomber Command were to be controlled by RAF Bomber Command but for domestic administration including cash and equipment accounting, they were to be attached to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing Substitution Unit. The Substitution Unit was attached to RAF No.2 Group for disciplinary purposes but for all other administration it was to be controlled by Headquarters RAF Bomber Command.



Staff of RAF 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing Substitution Unit at RAF Horsham St Faith

Although there are 36 RAF and WAAF personnel and 13 Officers in the previous photographs there are no official records available detailing trades of the personnel attached to this unit. It is not known if all the

personnel in the photograph were permanent HQ Office staff or whether the Liaison Staff, who were attached or moved around the various airfields, were also included. Records held by the National Archives indicate that this unit moved to RAF Horsham St Faith in August 1943 and the photographs would seem to confirm this. If the existing RAF personnel at Old Catton were integrated into the Substitution Unit a move such as this would mean that no units were now stationed at Old Catton and only the Signals Section would remain as it was still presumably part of the DTN network with connections to all airfields under the control of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing.

## 14<sup>th</sup> Combat Bombardment Wing

According to available information this unit was originally known as the 14<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Wing and was activated in Hawaii on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1940 but after suffering heavy losses at Pearl Harbour in December 1941 it was deactivated in January 1942. It was reactivated again in America on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1942 as the 14<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Wing and in February 1943 it was renamed 14<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Wing (Heavy) on allocation for duty with the VIII Air Force in England. The Bombardment Wing eventually arrived at Camp Lynn (High Wycombe) on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1943 but it is not known if this was a small initial detachment or whether it was the full complement of Headquarters personnel.

From the limited records available for this unit it would appear to indicate that it was probably a small detachment that initially arrived in England. There are many conflicting reports concerning the dates and locations of the various USAAF units during 1943 and these indicate that the 14<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Wing relocated several times in three months. Just five days after arriving in England the unit moved from Camp Lynn (High Wycombe) on the 9<sup>th</sup> June to RAF Hethel where it remained for three weeks and on the 1<sup>st</sup> July it is recorded that it relocated to Camp Thomas (Old Catton).

Irrespective of the number of personnel attached to this unit it is difficult to comprehend that Old Catton had the space to accommodate three different units at that time. There are many conflicting reports concerning dates and locations in 1943 and it is believed that once again confusion may have arisen as there appears to have been a lot of activity around the name Old Catton during the period April to September 1943. With this confusion it is therefore possible that the 14<sup>th</sup> Combat Bombardment Wing was actually relocated to RAF Horsham St Faith and not Camp Thomas (Old Catton). This would appear to be a more feasible option as there was limited flying at RAF Horsham St Faith at that time as the airfield was in the process of being extended. However the records that are available indicate that it moved from Old Catton to its final destination of RAF Shipdham two months later on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1943.

## Number 995 Balloon Squadron

During the early days of the war Norwich did not seem to be in much danger from air attack with only a few daylight "hit and run" raids carried out by a lone or small number of aircraft during 1940. The Anti-Aircraft Defences around the city at that time were very limited and there were a few Balloon Sites initially established during this period. It is not known what Balloon units or how many actual sites were involved at that time and as the city did not receive much attention from the Luftwaffe, these were withdrawn and deployed to the more vulnerable areas around London and the South Coast.

However all this changed in the spring of 1942 when the Baedeker Raids on medieval towns and cities was implemented by the Luftwaffe and on Monday 27<sup>th</sup> April 1942 Norwich was one of the cities singled out for attention. The attacking aircraft were virtually unopposed during this raid as most of the original defences had been withdrawn but on the 28<sup>th</sup> April Anti-Aircraft Defences were being hastily redeployed to provide the city with some protection. A Balloon Barrage was included in these defences but it is not known when they actually arrived in the area or whether they were able to get any sites operational before the next heavy raids occurred on the 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> April. However newspaper reports at the time seem to indicate that they were unable to allocate sites and become operational before the second devastating raid of the 29<sup>th</sup> April.

There are several conflicting reports of Balloon Units being deployed to Norwich and it is difficult to determine whether they were actually part of the Norwich defence or whether they were units operating elsewhere in the Norfolk area. One source indicates that 993 Mobile Balloon Squadron was assembled at Horsham St Faiths in April 1942 and that on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1942, this Squadron had reconnoitred and deployed 22 balloons within Norwich's airspace. By the end of May the number of balloon sites had increased to 36 and were regularly flown in the following months at a height of 6,500 ft when the city was under attack.

There are also reports that this squadron was still covering the Norwich area in August 1942 but that it vacated all sites and redeployed to Ipswich on 12<sup>th</sup> September. It is not known how many flights this unit consisted of as it appears that 993 Squadron B Flight may have had something to do with an obscure unit which was formed at 65 Thorpe Road on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1942.

There is no indication as to where the Headquarters Section of 993 Squadron was situated but records appear to indicate that the Headquarters Unit of 995 Balloon Squadron was located at RAF Old Catton although it is not known when this squadron actually arrived there. It is probable that this took place when 993 Squadron were redeployed to Ipswich in September 1942. According to sources, 995 Squadron was responsible for a total of forty balloon sites around Norwich but there do not appear to be any record of where all these sites were situated. One Balloon site was situated on RAF Old Catton Sports Field and some of the parks hosted a balloon site including Chapel Field gardens in the city centre and others appear to have been set up on cleared civilian bomb damaged sites. This squadron also appear to have had control of several operational sites at Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft but it is not known if they were also part of the Norwich deployment.

No.995 Balloon Squadron remained in the Norwich area until August 1943 when it was redeployed to Shoreham and Newhaven, presumably to provide cover around that area for the massive build up of troops in preparation for the D-Day landings. There was considerable activity involving other Balloon Units to facilitate the redeployment of No.995 Squadron and still provide a balloon barrage over Norwich. No.992 Balloon Squadron had reformed at No.11 Balloon Centre RAF Pucklechurch on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1943 and this Squadron was deployed to take control of a number of coastal sites at Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft from No.995 Squadron and No.1 Mobile Flight. On the 7<sup>th</sup> July, the crews of the relieved No.1 Mobile Flight transferred to RAF Pucklechurch for re-equipping and maintenance of equipment and to get ready for redeployment. It is not known how many crews were originally attached to No.1 Mobile Flight when it returned to RAF Pucklechurch but while there it also became a self accounting and self equipping unit which would appear to indicate that it was also being expanded to accept additional crews and equipment to service a large number of sites.

Records indicate that No.1 Mobile Flight left RAF Pucklechurch for Norwich on the 8<sup>th</sup> August 1943 to take over eighteen sites and once these were operational No. 995 Squadron would pull out from the remaining twenty two. There are no details as to how the remaining twenty two sites were to be replaced but it is presumed that these were to be operated by No.1 Mobile Flight and was the reason for it becoming a self accounting unit. Although it does not mention the unit it is interesting to note the following extract from the memoirs of a balloon operator who was posted from No.699 Balloon Squadron to RAF Chigwell to join a mobile unit there in 1943:

“.....we found feverish operations in progress, to make up a convoy on the square, an impressive sight, there were hundreds of vehicles, winches, 5 ton lorries, & hydrogen trailers, staff cars and the Dispatch Riders motorcycles, we found we'd lots of work to do, loading blankets, balloon equipment, cooking utensils, paraffin, and stores, tents, even latrine buckets, and items too numerous to mention ..... and at 10 o'clock the Military Police opened the gate and the head of the convoy roared out to our unknown destination travelling through Chelmsford and Ipswich before making an overnight stop at Thorpe Abbots airfield at 11.30pm ..... We now entered Norfolk and it seemed we had hardly settled down to our journey when the convoy pulled up on the outskirts of Norwich City, we heard with delight that this was to be our destination.”

RAF Chigwell was the Headquarters of No.4 Balloon Centre which controlled No(s).908, 909, and 910 Balloon Squadrons each of which consisted of five flights but there is no record of any Mobile Units being stationed there. In order to cover the remaining twenty two sites in Norwich it would have been necessary for at least two of the Balloon Squadrons consisting of ten Flights and twenty two Crews to be deployed. It is quite possible that this is what happened but there is no record of any of the three RAF Chigwell Squadrons being deployed to Norwich to join No.1 Mobile Balloon Unit. With no information to the contrary and the fact that No.1 Mobile Balloon Unit had become self accounting and equipping it would appear that this unit was to be in control of all forty Norwich balloon sites.

Unfortunately there is no information as to whether all the forty balloon sites around Norwich were operational as there appears to have been an obscure Balloon Flight operating in the city. This was



apparently formed on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1942 at 65 Thorpe Road and two weeks later the headquarters was moved to 59 Bracondale on 26<sup>th</sup> September. It was apparently formed with crews taken from 993 Squadron B Flight which had vacated all of its sites on 12<sup>th</sup> September. It was known as "A" Balloon Flight and was formed to create the illusion to both German aircrews and the British public that there were more balloon sites deployed in the area than there actually were.

This was achieved by using balloons known as "Salaam Balloons" which were not flyable and were installed at unattended sites. They were deployed at sites that were easily seen from the air and some were placed in areas where they could be seen by the local population. They were serviced by a crew of mobile operators who used air blowers to keep the balloons inflated and on 17<sup>th</sup> September Balloon Command installed a squeaker unit to give more credence to the existence of a real barrage. The so called squeaker was a short range radio transmitter that gave out a signal on an air band frequency to warn RAF and USAAF aircraft that they were in the vicinity of a balloon barrage.



Typical Operational Balloon Site

The Balloon Barrage covered the Norwich area until the cessation of WW2 but with very little information available it is difficult to accurately record which units they were. There was an operational Balloon Unit situated on RAF Old Catton sports field from 1942 and it is possible that if No.1 Mobile Balloon Unit became responsible for all the Norwich Balloon sites in 1943 it may also have set up its Headquarters Unit on the station as well.

## Other Units

There are indications that Army Air Defence Units may have been stationed at RAF Old Catton in the early days of WW2 and they probably remained there when it became a USAAF base. Sources also mention that by the end of 1940 Army Searchlight Sector control rooms were co-located with the RAF where possible. In 1935 the 1<sup>st</sup> Anti Aircraft Division was formed and in 1936 came under the operational control of RAF Fighter Command and was joined later the same year by the newly formed 2<sup>nd</sup> Anti-Aircraft (AA) Division which controlled anti-aircraft gun and searchlight units of the Territorial Army (TA) defending the East Midlands and East Anglia. The 72<sup>nd</sup> Middlesex Searchlight Regiment was part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> AA Division and in late 1941 the regiment transferred within 2nd AA Division to 41<sup>st</sup> (London) AA Brigade which covered East Anglia.

One source mentions that there was an office for Army personnel at Old Catton during the tenure of the Coltishall Sector Operations Room and that a WAAF eventually married a member of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Middlesex Regiment. There is also an Army Officer in the photograph taken at Old Catton with officers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing unfortunately there are no records to indicate who he is or whether he was an officer commanding an Anti Aircraft Regiment, Searchlight Battery or Searchlight Control Room. With two large Army Barracks (Britannia and Nelson) situated in Norwich it could be assumed that any Army Headquarters unit would have been based there rather than on an RAF Station.

There is also reference to the 242<sup>nd</sup> and 243<sup>rd</sup> Batteries of the 78<sup>th</sup> Anti Aircraft Regiment also being based in Norwich but there are no records to indicate whether any of the army units were actually based at Old Catton. With the very limited information available it is quite possible that no army units were ever stationed at Old Catton and that the references actually refer to AA Liaison Officers working with the Coltishall Sector Operations Room. If this was the case then these personnel would have relocated with the RAF Controllers, Plotters and Tellers when they moved to the new Operations Room at Stratton Strawless Hall.

## Post 1943

The period 1943 to 1947 is difficult to record as there is no official information available so it is presumed that Old Catton remained as a USAAF station until the end of the war. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing, 14<sup>th</sup> Combat Bombardment Wing and the RAF Substitution Unit stationed at RAF Old Catton were all re-deployed by 13<sup>th</sup> September 1943 which would imply that there would be a surfeit of accommodation available and it would seem inconceivable that the station would remain empty for the remaining war years.

Records indicated that 995 Balloon Squadron Headquarters may have been based at RAF Old Catton during its period in the city and there was also an operational Balloon site situated on the station sports field. Bearing in mind that only limited living accommodation was available on the station there is no indication as to where the personnel of these units were accommodated. It is presumed that 995 Squadron Headquarters staff would have been accommodated at RAF Coltishall as this was the nearest RAF Station. The personnel of the operational Balloon Unit may have been accommodated at Old Catton as they would have been on standby at all times to fly the balloon. If these assumptions are correct and if No.1 Mobile Balloon Unit became responsible for the Norwich area sites it is possible that their Headquarters may have been the only occupants of RAF Old Catton from September 1943.

From personal accounts of the area, mention is made of USAAF personnel travelling between RAF Horsham St Faith and RAF Old Catton but with no specific dates available these movements could refer just to 1942 and 1943. However from 1942 to 1945 RAF Horsham St Faith was a USAAF airfield accommodating several different units and it is possible that any one of these could have made use of the facilities at RAF Old Catton especially as all the previous units had left the station by late 1943.

It has to be assumed that the Signals Teleprinter Terminal would have continued to operate at least until the departure of the American forces began in July 1945 as it had communication connections to the local USAAF airfields, the Newmarket Signals Centre and the Sector Operations Room at Stratton Strawless. Whether the unit was operated by USAAF or RAF personnel between 1943 and 1945 is not known. When the USAAF withdrew from the United Kingdom, RAF Old Catton would have returned to War Office control but there are no records to indicate when this happened or whether it remained an operational station. Many of the local airfields closed on the withdrawal of the USAAF forces but some were occupied by various RAF units and remained operational. As their communications systems were probably still routed through Old Catton it is possible that the Signals Section may have remained an operational unit for at least a short period after the war.

Personal sources also appear to indicate that at some period RAF Old Catton became inactive or closed and was placed on a Care and Maintenance basis, when this occurred is not known but it could have been shortly after the USAAF withdrew in 1945. If it was put on a Care and maintenance basis then it would mean that during the period of inactivity the station buildings would be maintained to a specified standard and are inspected at regular intervals to carry out a given amount of repair. Whether this was carried out by civilian contractors or by a team of service personnel remaining on the station is not known. It is quite possible that, as the station was under the control of the War Office, it may have just been inactive with a small RAF unit on the base.

RAF Reserve Command was reformed on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1946 and its primary function was to maintain and train adequate reserves for flying and ground personnel. It was to be responsible for the recruitment and development of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR), Royal Auxiliary Air Force (RAuxAF) and University Air Squadron and would also assume responsibility for the Air Training Corps (ATC). As most of these units would be formed on a county basis it was necessary for Group Headquarters to find suitable venues for training purposes. With RAF Old Catton being inactive it is possible that it was being considered as a possible permanent station for either an RAFVR or RAuxAF unit as it was transferred from the War Office to Reserve Command with effect from 9<sup>th</sup> May 1947. This resulted in the Headquarters of No.16 Group Royal Observer Corps (ROC) relocating to RAF Old Catton in the summer of 1947 and 3620 RAuxAF Fighter Control Unit and 231 Squadron Air Training Corps taking up residence in 1948.

## Royal Observer Corps

In 1921 the Government set up a joint War Office and Air Ministry Committee to investigate the defence of South East England south of a line from Portland Bill to the Wash. The investigation was to establish a system for collection and distribution of information regarding the movement of hostile and friendly aircraft throughout the area. By 1926 many observation posts had been set up around London and in 1933 it was proposed to extend the Observer Corps coverage to Norfolk and Suffolk to create an area known as 16 Group.

The Centre for 16 Group was inaugurated at a meeting held at the Norwich Lads Club in early 1934 which was addressed by Air Commodore E A Masterman and Group Captain Courtney. Initially all recruits to this new organisation were to be enrolled as Special Constables to be maintained by the police and trained by the military. After the meeting the Chief Constable of Norwich Mr J H Dain contacted Mr F F Williamson Manager of the Norwich Union Fire Insurance Society and his brother Mr W W Williamson who was Manager of the Life Society to see if any of their staff would be interested in joining the new organisation. This resulted in 30 staff members of the Norwich Union Insurance Societies becoming the first observers to be recruited for the Centre. Although meetings of the Centre members were held, regular training exercises did not really begin until 1937. Because the Observer Corps communications system was reliant upon the Post Office telephone system the Centre was eventually setup in a basement of the Norwich Telephone Exchange on the corner of Dove Street and Guildhall Hill.

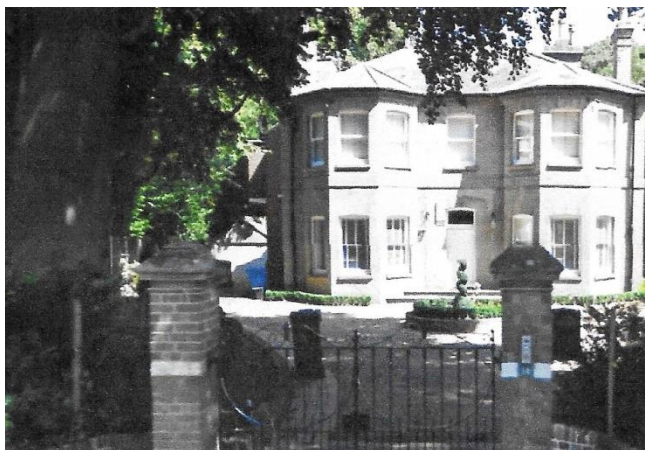
In 1940 the Group moved into the new Telephone Exchange in St Andrews Street but with very little activity during the "Phoney War" period it gave the Group the opportunity to perfect training by twice daily exercises. These exercises involved outlying Posts reporting all aircraft seen or heard to the Centre Plotters. The tracks of the hostile and friendly aircraft were displayed on the Operations Table in a similar manner to an RAF Operations Room using a letter and number designation which would be passed from RAF 12 Group Operations Room at Watnall. As the tracks of a raid moved over the Norfolk and Suffolk Observer Posts these were displayed on the Operations Table and the appropriate Fighter Group was informed so that Controllers could activate the appropriate defences.

The Royal Observer Corps (ROC) continued to carry out its operations throughout the war and in June 1944 all Groups were told to plot V1 Flying Bombs in the same way as aircraft. There was little ROC Groups could do concerning the V2 Rockets other than to plot their arrival and pass details to HQ Fighter Command. Then on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1945 all groups were informed that no more Air Raid Warnings would be sounded and on the 12<sup>th</sup> May No. 16 Group received the order to stand down.

After the Stand Down, members of No.16 Group remained in contact as there was a possibility that at some future date the Royal Observer Corps would reform. This came to fruition on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1946 when all former observers were invited to attend a meeting at the Carlton Cinema in All Saints Green. The Commandant of the ROC, Air Chief Marshal P Bernard 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Bandon GBE CB CVO DSO, advised all those present that a post war Corps would officially reform on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1947.



Air Chief Marshall P Bernard



"Fairfield" Lime Tree Road



In the short time available to get the Group up and running it was necessary for a selection board to appoint a Group Commandant and Deputy Commandant who then had the responsibility of recruiting the observers who would form the basis of the reformed No.16 Group. As the original Operations Room at the Norwich Telephone Exchange was no longer available, suitable accommodation for the new crews also had to be found. This resulted in the Centre taking up residence on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1947 in "Fairfield House" which was situated on Lime Tree Road Norwich. This house had probably been requisitioned at the beginning of the war and was considered to be suitable for the Centre to reform after an Operations Room was specially built in the back garden. All the outlying Norfolk Posts were reformed in their old wartime accommodation but in many cases improvements were necessary.

As it transpired only a few meetings of the new Group Centre took place at Fairfields before the requisition order expired and "Fairfields" returned to its former owners and No.16 Group Headquarters was relocated to more permanent quarters at the smallest autonomous station in the country, RAF Old Catton. This relocation is believed to have begun during the summer of 1947 and they were able to move into the Operations Room originally used by RAF Coltishall and the USAAF. Although the Tellers and RAF Liaison Officers positions were still at roughly the same level as the plotting table it was eminently suitable for ROC purposes. It is not known how many observers had been recruited but when the Centre moved to Old Catton there were sufficient Personnel available to form 4 Crews.

Training in this new environment was carried out in much the same way as during the war period and by 1948 both the RAF and the ROC were satisfied that live local exercises could safely be undertaken. No.16 Norwich Group were lucky in that there were still a large number of RAF Stations in the eastern area who could provide targets and fighters for local live exercises, whereas other Groups had to rely on simulated exercises due to lack of air activity in their area. As part of the training programme, Headquarters ROC introduced annual camps in 1948 and No.16 Group observers attended their first camp at RAF Thorney Island which included lectures and also air experience flights in the aircraft stationed there. The first large scale post war exercise undertaken by the Centre was carried out in September 1948 and was called Exercise Dagger and simulated the first three days of a sudden outbreak of war.

It was usual for Liaison Officers and Tellers to sit at a higher level than the plotting table so that they could easily see aircraft movements, but because the Operations Room was in a single storey building this was not possible. With the Cold War at its height in 1950 all personnel were still operating on one level and improvements were considered necessary especially as the Operations Room became a shared facility with the 3620 RAuxAF Fighter Control Unit. This resulted in a portion of the floor being lowered by approximately five feet leaving the remaining original floor to form a small balcony area which provided a much better view of the plotting table. There were now two small balconies one on either side of the plotting table one was occupied by the ROC Tellers and the other occupied by the RAF Controllers.



ROC Plotting Table in its new position on the lowered floor of the Operations Room



Long Range Plotting Board also on lowered floor

In 1953 a reorganisation of the Royal Observer Corps took place and some Groups were disbanded and some were renumbered. The Norwich Centre was renumbered as Headquarters No.6 Group and they also absorbed the Bury St Edmunds Group and their Operations Room became a training centre. In addition to aircraft plotting, No.6 Group were also given a new watching role which was to report any Unidentified Flying Objects under the code name Pheno giving time, bearing and approximate height.

Because of the Cold War, the ROC was given an additional role in June 1955 of reporting radioactive fallout in the event of a nuclear attack. With no experience of such a situation the whole Corps had to develop new techniques and expertise as to how this could be achieved. At the time all they had available for plotting were the aircraft position plaques and these were converted to show the ROC Post number and radiation readings in roentgens. The readings coming in to the Centre from the outlying Posts within No.6 Group were to be plotted on the Main Table and readings from adjacent Groups were placed on the Long Range Board. By 1956 the new systems were considered satisfactory and No.6 Group took part in a full scale Home Office fallout exercise called Cloverleaf which took place on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> April. The exercise was similar to plotting aircraft except that the position plaques remained stationary while the information on them changed. It was around this time that the ROC renamed the Centres to Controls

In order to ensure that the RAF could continue to operate satisfactorily after a nuclear attack they needed to know which airfields had been subject to blast damage or radiation fallout. This resulted in the ROC Headquarters being requested by RAF Fighter Command to provide suitably qualified personnel to staff the Fallout Reporting Sections at the Air Defence Operating Centre (ADOC) at RAF Bentley Priory and Sector Operations Centres (SOCs). This resulted in the ROC becoming the field force for the United Kingdom Warning and Monitoring Organisation (UKWMO) which had a Norfolk Sector Operations Centre situated at Hopton.

The Norwich Group Control were reporting nuclear bursts and fallout to the UKWMO Sector Operations Centre at Hopton who then passed the information on to the Air Defence Operating Centre (AODC) using the voice telling procedures then in use. From this information ADOC built up a national picture of the bomb blasts and fallout which was then passed on to Nuclear Reporting Cells (NRCs) in the appropriate Groups. The Nuclear Reporting Cells were manned by ROC personnel who were situated within RAF Radar Units to provide the Fighter Controllers with up to date information of the attack.

A Nuclear Reporting Cell (NRC) was formed in 1960 with volunteers from the Group Control Crews to work alongside the RAF Fighter Controllers at RAF Neatishead. In the early days there were no set procedures and information received from ADOC was plotted on totes rather than displays from which the NCR team provided the Fighter Controllers with details regarding the attack situation. Because the original information concerning an attack went through several channels it was a long time before it actually arrived at the Neatishead NRC. As a result an unofficial direct link was made from No.6 Group Control to the NRC team at Neatishead so that the Duty Controller could pass early advice on the current situation. Unfortunately due to the disastrous fire at the Neatishead underground Operations Room in 1966, the NRC had to cease operations and all personnel returned to their original crews at Group Control. It was not until 1970 that the NCR was reformed in a small room at the rear of the Neatishead Operations Room. The teams required to operate the new NCR were recruited from members of the disbanded Hopton UKWMO Sector Operations Centre.

Most ROC Posts at that time were situated above ground which would leave them vulnerable in the event of a nuclear attack and in June 1957 No.6 Group's first underground post was constructed at Pakefield. Around this time all ROC Centres were renamed Controls and were to be provided with bomb proof nuclear protected buildings. Plans had also been lodged with the local council for permission to construct a new semi-underground nuclear Operations Block with a prefabricated accommodation block alongside at RAF Old Catton. These were to be situated on the only open space available between the Station Headquarters buildings and the Officers quarters. From 1958 the plotting exercises began to move from aircraft to a nuclear role and with no instruments available all information passed was synthetic and taken from written material. With the threat of nuclear attacks more likely than conventional air attacks, priorities changed and from 7<sup>th</sup> September 1960 the prime role of the ROC was to report all nuclear bursts and fallout. However aircraft recognition training was still to be carried out over a designated area of Eastern England by No.6 Group to protect the V-bomber force whose bases were in this area.

By 1960 work had already commenced on the new nuclear protected Operations Block which was being constructed to a standard three level semi-sunken design with a pagoda style blockhouse entrance. This new building would provide operational accommodation and decontamination facilities as well as a small kitchen and canteen. Only one level was completely below ground, the middle level was partially below ground and

the section above ground was protected from radiation and fallout from a nuclear explosion by a blast wall consisting of a large earth mound. The building was eventually completed in early 1961 and for the next few months equipment was being moved from the old Operations Room and installed in the new complex ready for it to undertake its nuclear role. The new Centre Operations Room was officially opened on 27<sup>th</sup> September 1961 by Sir Edmund Bacon the Lord Lieutenant of Norfolk after which the official party was given a tour of the building to watch a training exercise.



No.6 Group New Operations Block

By the time the new Centre complex had been opened, RAF Old Catton had been reduced to an inactive status and parental responsibilities for the station had been taken over by RAF Horsham St Faith and it was an indication that the station was probably being considered for closure. This eventually happened on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1963 when RAF Horsham St Faith was relieved of its responsibilities for RAF Old Catton and the Air Ministry disposed of the majority of the original site to make way for a re-aligned Norwich Ring Road between St Faiths Road and the Wroxham Road. The area retained by the MOD now consisted of the old Officers accommodation, the new ROC Centre Operations Block and the old Operations Room and Headquarters buildings. The old Guardroom and Sick Quarters were demolished and the ROC occupied the old Officers accommodation, the original Operations and Headquarters buildings were now empty apart from two or three offices occupied by the Norfolk ATC Wing. This new site was eventually surrounded by a chain link fence along the east side of the old Officers accommodation along the new Chartwell Road and round to the first private house on Constitution Hill. From being an RAF station it now became a small piece of MOD land adjacent to a main road consisting of a recently built nuclear bunker and three old WW2 military wooden buildings. The main entrance to this new site was on the new Chartwell Road which opened up to a small car park that had been constructed between the new Centre Bunker and the old Operations Room.



Main Entrance to the new site  
Original Operations Block in background

As No.6 Group continued to expand into its nuclear role, logarithmic charts were introduced to record fallout and scientific officers were appointed to use the information at the Centre instead of at Sector Control.



Communications between the Centre and outlying Posts also changed when the standard head and breast telephone sets were replaced in 1964 with Teletalk units which operated in a similar manner to radio transmitters but still using above ground telephone lines. Teleprinters and punched tape equipment was also installed to receive and pass messages to other Sectors and Groups. By 1968 the Operations Room had completely converted to a nuclear role with the addition of two transparent screens used to display nuclear bombs and their fallout. One of these displays required observers to enter details by mirror writing so that they could be seen the correct way round by those in front of the screen.

February 1968 also saw a further reorganisation of the ROC resulting in the loss of a further 680 Posts and 5,000 observers which meant that No.6 Group had to close 30 Posts around Norfolk and Suffolk and release or somehow absorb 300 observers. This resulted in observers, many of whom had been with the Corps over 20 years, being given the option of moving to a different Post or resigning. The Norwich Centre also had the difficult task of deciding which Crew should be disbanded and its members spread among the other Crews and it was eventually decided that this should be Crew 3 as this was the smallest.

Regular training exercises continued through the 1970's and 1980's with the emphasis on efficiency and in 1984 this resulted in the teleprinters being replaced with modern computerised AD9000 message switch equipment. This enabled messages to be viewed on a visual display before transmission direct to other Groups within the United Kingdom. To maintain communications in the event of a nuclear explosion this new equipment operated over an Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) hardened landline network. Towards the end of the 1980's the Cold War was beginning to subside with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact Countries and a Soviet invasion of Western Europe no longer seemed likely.

In 1989 destruction of the Berlin Wall began and borders opened and Communist regimes in Eastern Europe were ousted which eventually led to the end of the Cold War in 1991. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, international security changed and the Government issued its Options for Change review in 1990. This resulted in the restructuring of the Armed Forces which was aimed at cutting defence spending. Other casualties of this restructuring were the UK's nuclear civil defence organisations which included the United Kingdom Warning and Monitoring Organisation and Royal Observer Corps.

All these changes resulted in the No.6 Group Control and Monitoring Posts personnel being officially stood down on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1991. From October those members of the Nuclear Reporting Cell who operated from RAF Neatishead were one of the 16 retained units to continue to provide a Nuclear, Biological and Chemical service to the military forces. The name of the NRC was also changed to Nuclear Biological and Chemical Cell (NBCC) and control was transferred from the UKWMO to ROC Headquarters and became part of Headquarters No.11 Group RAF at Bentley Priory. Eventually this last remaining Unit of the Royal Observer Corps in Norfolk was stood down on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1995

All the equipment was removed from the Group Control Bunker and the site remained unused and the area soon became overgrown and in 1997 the MOD put the ROC land and buildings up for auction. The site was bought by a local firm Belmont Industries with the intention of using the area for a retail development which did not come to fruition. For many years the entrance to the site remained locked and billboards were erected along its road frontage and the mound around the middle floor of the bunker was partially excavated. The area became very dilapidated and suggestions were made that the Control bunker should become a heritage site and museum which resulted in the owners quickly demolishing it. After many years of neglect, work eventually began in 2019 to build new retail outlets on the old MOD site and it now accommodates a small local Co-Op store and a drive through Starbucks Coffee outlet.

### 3620 (County of Norfolk) RAuxAF Fighter Control Unit

Due to the demobilisation of wartime personnel in the immediate post war years, the RAF were experiencing a manpower shortage and with the advent of the Cold War this could have had a detrimental effect on the UK air defences. During the war years Radar had evolved and was able to identify enemy aircraft and to accurately track their course but the Control and Reporting system to pass on this information was extremely manpower intensive. To overcome the manning difficulties of the post war RAF and with new and more advanced radars coming into service, plans were put in place to form a number of Royal Auxiliary Air Force (RAuxAF) Air Defence Units later to be known as Fighter Control Units (FCUs). These units and also the

reactivated RAuxAF Flying Squadrons would be controlled by Reserve Command which was reformed on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1946 in order to maintain and train adequate reserves of flying and ground personnel.

With RAF Neatishead being an important part of the UK Air Defences at that time it was obvious that Norfolk would become the Headquarters for one of the new RAuxAF Air Defence Units whose function was to be radar detection, plotting of enemy aircraft and controlling the operation of fighter aircraft. They were to be staffed by civilian volunteers who would attend their units evenings and weekends for training so that they would be able to provide personnel to support the regular RAF. Each of these units was expected to have its Headquarters in close proximity to a town or city and be fully self contained so that it could deploy and man radar installations in an emergency. For training purposes they would need access to an Operations Room, Classrooms, Workshops, Offices and Catering facilities all of which were already available at RAF Old Catton.

It is not known if RAF Old Catton was inactive at the time but it had obviously been considered to be a suitable Headquarters for an Air Defence Unit as it was transferred on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1947 from the control of the War Office to the recently reformed Reserve Command. RAF Old Catton was still a small autonomous station manned by 35 regular RAF airmen including a Station Adjutant. With only part time volunteer units, the Royal Observer Corps and a RAuxAF Fighter Control Unit, now based on the station there was no appointment for a full time Station Commander. This role became part of the duties of the Commanding Officer of the Fighter Control Unit with the small contingent of regular RAF officers and airmen responsible for day to day running of the base.

It must have been quite a challenge to set up a new unit from scratch bearing in mind that it was a volunteer organisation requiring personnel able to operate the latest radar and radio equipment as well as all the other staff necessary for the efficient operation of an Air Defence Unit (ADU). As this was not a regular RAF unit it would not be possible to post in fully trained staff to get it up and running. The initial requirement would have to be to recruit ex-RAF personnel with the appropriate RAF experience in Radar and Plotting who would then be able to train other volunteers in Fighter Control Operations and this was borne out by the first newspaper advertisements that appeared in the local papers on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1947

The advertisements indicated that there were immediate vacancies existing within 3620 Air Defence Unit for experienced ex-members of the RAF. The trades required were Special Duty Clerks, Radar Operators, Teleprinter Operators, R/T Operators, Telephonists, Wireless Mechanics and Radar Mechanics and there were also a limited number of vacancies for ex-RAF Officers under the age of 35 experienced in Fighter Control operations. It is presumed that these recruits would form the intake that would be able to train any future volunteers who had no knowledge of operating in a Fighter Control environment. The advertisement also mentioned that other branches and trades including WAAF personnel would be required at a later date.

All replies to this initial advertisement for full particulars of training, pay allowances and terms of service were available on application to the 3620 ADU Office which was situated in the Territorial Army (TA) Drill Hall, All Saints Green, Norwich. It is probable that the ADU office was initially situated at the Army Drill Hall because of its city centre location which was easily accessible to prospective new recruits and it was also manned 7 days a week from 9.0 am to 8.0 pm. It is not known who manned this city centre office as the first Commanding Officer was yet to be appointed but it is possible that this could have been undertaken by Flight Lieutenant A Flatters the Adjutant of RAF Old Catton.

The first Commanding Officer of 3620 ADU was Squadron Leader F E Lissimore MBE who relinquished his wartime RAFVR Commission on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1947 and on the same date was appointed as a Squadron Leader in the reconstituted RAuxAF. During the war he had served as second in command of No.15083 Ground Control Interception (GCI) Station which was one of the Mobile Radar Units set up in September 1943 for operations on D-Day as a Night Fighter Control Unit. He had previously also held the acting rank of Squadron Leader when he was Commanding Officer of RAF Neatishead in 1945 and would have been well qualified to undertake the formation of a new Fighter Control Unit. It is not known when Sqd Ldr Lissimore actually left the RAF but as all members of the RAuxAF were civilian volunteers he would have been on the reserve list at the time of his appointment to 3620 FCU.

As far as is known this unit only had three Commanding Officers appointed during its 13 year existence and Squadron Leader Lissimore did not officially relinquish command of the unit until the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1952. However

when the unit was inspected by Air Marshal Sir Robert Foster in September 1950 newspaper reports indicated that Squadron Leader R G Black was in temporary command of the unit. Squadron Leader Black was one of the first officers to join 3620 FCU in October 1947 and it is not known why he was in charge at the time of the inspection or how long he retained this role. There are no records available to indicate that Squadron Leader Black was officially appointed to command the unit and it may just have been that Squadron Leader Lissimore was for some reason, not able to attend on the day of the inspection. Squadron Leader Black had his service extended in October 1952 for a period of two years before finally retiring from the RAuxAF on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1954.

When Squadron Leader Lissimore retired in May 1952 the unit was without a Commanding Officer for a short period before a replacement was appointed to the post and it is probable that Squadron Leader R G Black temporarily fulfilled that role. On the 7<sup>th</sup> June 1952 Wing Commander Harold Priestley who had served in the Secretarial Branch during WW2, relinquished his RAFVR Reserve commission on appointment as a Squadron Leader in the RAuxAF to become Commanding Officer of 3620 FCU. Prior to becoming Commanding Officer of the unit Squadron Leader Priestley had been helping out in a civilian capacity as an instructor with the ATC 102E Gliding School which operated at that time from RAF Horsham St Faith. Unfortunately Squadron Leader Priestley was only in command of the Fighter Control Unit for a period of 2 years when it is believed that he had to resign because of his civilian business commitments and he transferred to the RAuxAF Reserve on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1954.



Squadron Leader R G Black



Squadron Leader D A G Parry

After the retirement of Squadron Leader Priestley the unit appears to have been without a commanding officer for quite a long period before a replacement was officially appointed. It is presumed that this delay was caused because Fighter Command were looking for a suitable replacement as there were no officers on the unit with sufficient experience to be considered for promotion. They were probably looking for a person who had previously held a senior position within the RAF and would be able to take command of the Fighter Control Unit. This eventually led to Squadron Leader D A G Parry DSO MBE DFC\* being commissioned in the General Duties branch of the RAuxAF on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1955, possibly as temporary Commanding Officer, before he was officially appointed to command the unit on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1956. At the time of his appointment to the RAuxAF commission he actually held the rank of Wing Commander in the RAFVR(T) as Commanding Officer of Norfolk Wing of the Air Training Corps. It appears that he continued to carry out both appointments for a period of four months until he relinquished command of Norfolk Wing in October 1955. Squadron Leader Parry remained as Commanding Officer of 3620 FCU until the unit was disbanded in 1961 when he then became Controller of the Norfolk Warning and Monitoring Organisation and finally relinquishing his commission on the 8<sup>th</sup> April 1965.

Although most records indicate that Fighter Control Units began forming in 1948 this was probably the date that they had actually recruited sufficient staff to become operational. The first newspaper advertisements in March 1947 for the Norwich unit clearly stated that the formation of the County of Norfolk Auxiliary Air Defence Unit will commence forthwith. As it was the only RAF unit located at Old Catton it is believed that it was the only volunteer unit in the country that initially also had the responsibility for the day to day operation of an RAF station which was carried out by regular RAF personnel. The permanent staff consisting of an RAF Flight Lieutenant (Adjutant) and 30 airmen were initially responsible to the Commanding Officer of the Fighter Control Unit for the operation of the station. How long this situation remained is not known but in all probability it changed when RAF Old Catton was transferred from Home Command to Fighter Command on the 8<sup>th</sup> May 1953 and RAF Horsham St Faith took over the parenting responsibility for the station



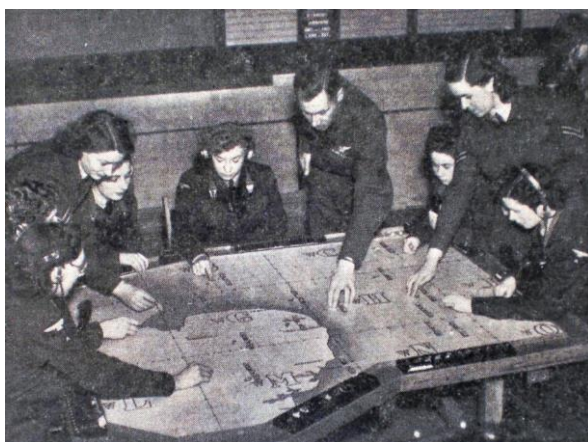
The main occupation of the unit was that of enemy aircraft interception which was spotted and tracked by radar and the Royal Observer Corps. The FCU was accommodated in the east wing of the station Headquarters building which had direct access to the Operations Room. The administrative facilities available consisted of several lecture rooms, offices, a signals section, a technical workshop and also radar simulators. This latter piece of equipment consisted of synthetic radar consoles capable of giving a display of aircraft and their movements which operators could then pass on to the Plotters in the Operations Room to provide realistic training exercises. The unit also had responsibility for the living quarters, catering facilities, equipment section, motor transport facilities and even a small station sick quarters.



Personnel of 3620 County of Norfolk Fighter Control Unit

The first year of operation appeared to consist of recruitment and training of plotters, radar operators and the various technical trades which were required for the main role of the unit. In July 1948 a second phase of recruitment began for personnel to fill the remaining trades required which were for Cooks, Nursing Orderlies, Motor Transport Drivers and Fitters as well as a limited number of ex-WAAF officers. This intake was aimed at men and women between the ages of 18 and 38 offering good prospects of advancement in rank especially for ex-RAF and WAAF personnel. It is presumed that once all these trades had completed their training the unit would have been capable of deploying in an emergency. There is no information as to the total number of personnel required for the efficient operation of a Fighter Control Unit, but in July 1949 when the Norfolk Unit attended annual camp with a total of one hundred and fifteen members they were the largest Fighter Control Unit in the country.

When the FCU was originally formed in 1947 the Operations Room had not been in use for several years and was still the same as it was when the Coltishall Sector staff left in 1943. Being situated in a single storey wooden building both the Controllers and Plotters were all operating at the same level making it difficult for the Controllers to view the Plotting Table. This was subsequently changed in late 1949 by the lowering of the existing floor by approximately 1.5 metres to provide a raised balcony for the controllers. How long this work took to complete is not known as it would have required the excavating and removal of several tons of soil under the existing wooden floor with no direct outside access apart from four small windows. However once completed it provided a raised area for the controllers giving them a much better view of aircraft movements on the plotting table.



FCU Plotting Table after lowering of floor

The Air Ministry introduced a scheme in 1950 to better integrate RAF Fighter Command and the volunteer RAuxAF Fighter Squadrons and Fighter Control Units. This would give the part time volunteer personnel the chance to work with their regular counterparts so that they would be fully operational for front line work should an emergency situation develop. No.12 Group which covered the Midlands and East Anglia introduced their first training weekend for the volunteer personnel on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1950 to take place at RAF Horsham St Faith. The first fighter squadrons to participate in this scheme were No(s) 610, 613, and 616 who relocated from their home bases to Horsham St Faith to carry out a weekend of training exercises with the regular RAF squadrons. As the air exercises undertaken by the fighter squadrons would be monitored by radar the Norwich Fighter Control Unit was also activated as part of the scheme so that they could carry out live training with their regular counterparts at RAF Neatishead. Similar exercises by other auxiliary flying squadrons continued to take place one weekend each month which gave the Fighter Control Unit several months of live training.

There does not appear to have been an upper limit as to the number of personnel required for a Fighter Control Unit as by May 1950 there were 194 volunteer airmen and women on the unit. Sources at that time indicate that the unit was fully functional with clerks, cooks, drivers, radar operators, plotters and controllers but they were still advertising for ex-WAAF Officers and a number of ex-airmen and airwomen with operations room experience. It is known that when officers were recruited their commission was for a period of five years so it is also possible that when personnel volunteered for service they also signed for a specific period. It is probable that after completing their period of service some personnel would leave the unit which was the reason they were advertising in 1954 for secretarial and fighter control officers as well as radar operators and fighter plotters.

By 1957 the Control and Reporting system was being re-equipped and reorganised which meant that consideration was being given by the government to reduce the number of FCU's and Radar Reporting Units to a maximum of thirteen units. Fortunately the Norwich Unit was at that time one of the units to be retained but there was some uncertainty regarding the long term requirement to retain any of these units. This uncertainty must have affected the morale of the members of the unit during the next three years as the total personnel of the unit had dropped to 60 by the time the Fighter Control Units were eventually disbanded. Whether this was as a result of the control and reporting service being reorganised and the introduction of new air defence techniques coming in to use or whether this was due to personnel being time expired is not known. However, on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1960 the Secretary of State for Air, Mr Julian Amery, announced that as a result of the reorganisation the continued employment of RAuxAF Units in the Fighter Control role could no longer be justified and therefore all units would be disbanded on 31 January 1961.

When the Commanding Officer of the unit Squadron Leader Parry was interviewed by the local press he said that he was sad to see the last active reserve force of the RAF disbanded as several of the airmen and airwomen had served with the unit from the early days. All sixty personnel were to be given the opportunity of joining the UK Warning and Monitoring Organisation which was operated by mainly ex-ROC personnel but it is not known how many took up this offer.

## Air Training Corps

### 231 (Norwich) Squadron

It was not until 1933 when Air Commodore Sir J A Chamier was appointed to the post of Secretary General of the Air League of the British Empire that the notion of a national organisation to promote the younger generation's interest in aviation began to move forward. As a senior RAF officer, Air Commodore Chamier was well aware of the need to attract young men into aviation and he was instrumental in getting the Air League to consider ideas for the formation of an Air Cadet Corps. The suggestions put forward were eventually accepted and Marshall of the Royal Air Force Sir John Salmon GCB CMG CVO DSO\* became its chairman and Air Commodore Chamier was elected secretary and the first Air Defence Cadet Corps Squadron was formed in July 1938.

At the beginning of WW2 the Air Ministry were so impressed by the work being undertaken by the ADCC squadrons at RAF airfields that early in 1940, they began the process of considering the possibility of forming an official pre-entry organisation. This would be introduced on a nationwide basis to give part-time training to young men who wished to join the Royal Air Force. By the end of 1940 a definite scheme was beginning to emerge and the ideas were put to the War Cabinet by the Secretary of State for Air on 9 December 1940.

Approval was eventually given for the creation of an Air Training Corps, which would provide pre-entry training for youths who intended to join the RAF as either aircrew or technicians.

The Rt. Hon. Sir Archibald Sinclair released details of the formation of the new Air Training Corps (ATC) to the press on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1941. Immediately after the press release a telegram was sent to Sir Archibald Sinclair by a Norwich businessman and President of the Norfolk and Norwich Aero Club, Capt. A A Rice MC, stating that there were people in Norwich who were interested in organising the Air Cadet scheme in this area. On the 16<sup>th</sup> January, Capt. Rice brought together several prominent citizens of Norwich with the object of forming a local civilian committee to establish a branch of the Air Training Corps for Norwich and District. At this meeting an official committee was formed and consisted of Capt. A A Rice, Mr F C Jex (Chairman of the Education Committee), Mr C C White, Mr C G Gowing, Mr H A Pank, Mr B J Hanley (Lord Mayor) and Mr J D Freeman, who was appointed as Secretary.



Capt A A Rice MC after being commissioned  
as a Flight Lieutenant and joining 231 Squadron

At a meeting of the ATC committee on 28 January 1941, it was agreed that, subject to the approval of the Norwich Education Committee, the following schools should become the Squadrons Headquarters:

- No. 1 Squadron -- City of Norwich School - became 230 Squadron
- No. 2 Squadron -- St Marks Senior Boys School - became 231 Squadron
- No. 3 Squadron -- Alderman Jex School - became 232 Squadron
- No. 4 Squadron -- Wensum View School - became 233 Squadron
- No. 5 Squadron -- Thorpe School - became 1496 Squadron

On 1<sup>st</sup> February 1941, Air Commodore Chamier broadcast to the nation to say that the Air Training Corps had officially come into existence and three days later the Corps was established by Royal Warrant with HM King George VI becoming its Air Commodore in Chief. Although No 231 Squadron commenced operation at St Marks School on Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> February 1941, they were only situated there for two or three weeks and then moved to Crooks Place School (now Bignold School). All officers appointed as Squadron Commanders had previous flying experience and squadron officers were having drill instruction and parades at RAF Horsham St Faiths (now Norwich Airport) so that the knowledge gained could be passed on to the cadets.



231 (Crooks Place) Squadron 1943. The two females were members of the Girls Training Corps who assisted with the squadron administration



All the Norwich Squadrons continued to operate throughout the war years but by 1944 because of the superiority of the Allied Air forces the requirement for RAF aircrew had considerably reduced and there was a lot of uncertainty about the continuing role of the ATC. This uncertainty was very noticeable within the five Norwich squadrons as the number of new recruits had reduced considerably leading to 232 (Alderman Jex) Squadron being disbanded in September 1944. Their Detached Flight situated at the Norwich Union Insurance Society, which was under the command of Flying Officer J Macgregor, became a Detached Flight of 231 Squadron.

By June 1945 the ATC within the county was drastically reducing in cadet numbers and many of the squadrons around Norfolk were disbanding. The Norwich squadrons were also losing cadets and 233 (Wensum View) was the next city squadron to disband and their cadets were transferred to 231, probably because the Squadron was situated in the city centre. The remaining Norwich squadrons (230, and 1496) disbanded by early 1946 and cadets were transferred to the central 231 (Crooks Place) School squadron. After the war there was pressure from the Norwich Education Committee to return Crooks Place School to normal operating procedures which meant that 231 Squadron was now looking for more permanent accommodation. With the ATC being under the control of RAF Reserve Command in 1948 it was obvious that consideration would be given to relocating 231 Squadron with the other reserve units at RAF Old Catton.

As all the existing buildings on RAF Old Catton were in use, additional accommodation had to be found before the Squadron could relocate. Fortunately RAF Coltishall had three corrugated metal huts surplus to requirements and these were dismantled and transferred to RAF Old Catton where they were erected on a concrete base on the edge of the station sports field. Each hut was approximately 40 feet long and they were erected to form a "U" shape with short corridors linking each building. The assembly hall was the base of the "U" with the huts on either side fitted out as offices, storerooms and classrooms. The only heating in the building consisted of a small tortoise stove in the staff office, all the classrooms were unheated. A Tannoy system was put into each of the classrooms so that the Commanding Officer and Adjutant could pass messages to either the cadets or instructors without having to leave their office.

The new Squadron Headquarters was officially opened at the beginning of Battle of Britain week on Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> September 1948. The opening ceremony was a ceremonial affair with a Dedication Drumhead Service conducted by the Squadron Padre the Reverend B P Luscombe, Major the Viscount Coke read the lesson and the Dean of Norwich gave an address. After the service the Squadron and Guard of Honour were inspected by Air Vice Marshall F P Don and the deputy Mayor of Norwich Mr A E Baines did the honours and officially unlocked the new headquarters. The event was also attended by representatives of the RAF, Royal Observer Corps, 3620 Fighter Control Unit, Officers and Cadets from other squadrons and a large number of members of the public. During the ceremony, Mr B Hirst chairman of the Norwich branch of RAFA, presented a cheque for £10 to the squadron welfare fund.



AVM F P Don OBE MA, inspecting Guard of Honour



Major the Viscount Coke reading the Lesson

During the period the squadron was situated at Crooks Place School they had plenty of classroom space available but the outside area was very limited for other activities. With the move to the new Headquarters the squadron was now in the fortunate position of being situated on an RAF Station with access to large open areas including a two acre sports field which could be utilised for outside activities. As groups of cadets could now see each other while standing several hundred metres apart they were also able to practice signalling techniques using Aldis Lamps. The MT Section was especially useful as it had a large open concrete area available which was ideal for squadron parades and inspections as well as enabling marching band and drill instruction to take place.



231 Squadron Annual Inspection and March Past 1950

For the next twelve years 231 squadron continued to operate alongside the other units on the station until the disbandment of the 3620 RAuxAF FCU in January 1961. The only occupants then remaining on the station were 231 Squadron with their own premises, the Headquarters of Norfolk ATC Wing who occupied two or three offices in the Station Headquarters building and the Royal Observer Corps situated in their own self contained nuclear bunker. As all other buildings were now unoccupied and with no RAF unit on the station, it was reduced to an inactive status on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1961 and RAF Horsham St Faith took over the parenting responsibilities. Consideration was obviously then taking place as to the closure of the station and this eventually took place two years later on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1963 when all Air Ministry assets, except the land and buildings situated along the southern boundary, were disposed of.

Because 231 Squadron Headquarters was situated on land which would not be retained when the station closed, it was now looking for new premises. Fortunately the permanent ATC administration staff of Norfolk Wing were the only occupants of the old Operations Block and Station Headquarters building which was in the MOD retained area. These buildings contained several empty offices and lecture rooms which would be ideal for use as the new Squadron Headquarters. There was also a large tarmac area between the buildings and the ROC Bunker which could be used as the squadron assembly area or parade ground but there was no assembly hall inside this building. If a parade had to be held inside the only space available was the old ROC Operations Room which was quite a large area, but unfortunately it had been re-designed on two levels which meant that a brick wall was required to hold the higher level. This wall severely reduced the amount of space available to hold a parade plus the fact that it was necessary to negotiate steps to the lower level. When the squadron relocated to their new premises in November 1962 this did at least bring the ATC units under one roof, a situation which still prevails to this day.



New Squadron Headquarters



Crowded Evening Assembly in old Operations Room



Shortly after the squadron relocated the majority of the RAF Old Catton site had become part of the new Norwich Ring Road (Chartwell Road) and a large housing development. This left the old wartime buildings in close proximity to the new road and opposite the new housing estate. It is not known if it was because the original RAF buildings on this new MOD site were beginning to deteriorate and become an eyesore, or whether it was decided that they should be demolished and a new building erected specifically to accommodate the ATC. However in 1971 the original RAF Headquarters was demolished as well as part of the building behind it containing the old ROC Operations Room. This latter building was demolished as far as the Operations Room which was reconstructed as an assembly hall with the plotting area becoming a cellar. While this renovation was taking place a chain-link fence was erected alongside the ROC car park to provide two specific areas, one for the ROC and one for the ATC each of which now had their own separate entrances off Chartwell Road.



Re-building the old Operations Block



New Assembly Hall

The remainder of the new build consisted of classrooms and toilet facilities for the new 231 Squadron Headquarters with separate office facilities for the permanent administrative staff of the Norfolk & Suffolk Wing Headquarters. For some reason no separate office accommodation was provided in the new building for either the squadron Commanding Officer or Staff. Although not an ideal situation for either party, Norfolk and Suffolk Wing allowed the Squadron Officers to have access to their accommodation on parade nights for several years. Then in 1977 a refurbishment took place when the outside walls were given a facelift and clad with UPVC it is not known whether the facelift was to provide additional weatherproofing to the original wooden structure or to make it blend in better with the local surroundings. At the same time one of the classrooms used by the squadron was revamped into an office for the Commanding Officer and Adjutant and all access to the Wing Headquarters offices was revoked. It was a further 12 years before additional funding became available and the squadron was requested to submit suggestions for the refurbishment of the existing accommodation. One of the suggestions put forward by the squadron was that the building should be extended to incorporate a new entrance lobby and separate office facilities for staff and in 1991 this actually came to fruition.

When the squadron was first formed the ATC was an all male pre-entry organisation with the aim of meeting the growing WW2 demand for RAF Pilots and Aircrew and provide an adequate flow of recruits for the technical trades. Although females were not initially allowed to join the ATC they were able to join a similar organisation called the Girls Training Corps (GTC), which had both aviation and nautical sections. Then in 1980 a decision was made to allow girls to join the ATC on a trial basis in a limited number of squadrons. At the end of a successful two year trial period female cadets were allowed to join squadrons nationwide and receive the same training as the boys. With the introduction of female cadets it also became necessary for units to attract suitable adult female staff to assist with their welfare. With suitable staff in place the first 10 probationer girl cadets joined 231 Squadron in February 1985 but unfortunately their names are not known.

Over the years the ATC has developed into a national organisation sponsored by the RAF to encourage in young people a practical interest in aviation as well as developing a spirit of adventure and qualities of leadership and good citizenship. There is now a diverse range of activities available to cadets including Flying, Gliding, DofE, Athletics, Cross Country Running, Swimming and they are also able to obtain Vocational Qualifications. It is not known how many cadets have passed through the squadron during its long existence



but over the years being a member of the ATC has resulted in many cadets, both male and female, attaining senior positions within their civil or military career choices. One cadet was a member of Norwich City Council for many years before becoming Lord Mayor of Norwich in 1992 and at least one female cadet has achieved her ambition to pursue a career in the RAF and has become a fast jet pilot originally flying the Tornado GR1 but is currently now flying the latest Typhoon FRG4.

It is unfortunate that the world was overcome by the Corona virus pandemic in 2020 as this stopped all ATC activity and closed squadrons throughout the United Kingdom for more than a year. During the period of closure the squadron has had to adapt from normal parade night activities and resort to providing interesting virtual parade nights to retain the interest of cadets. Squadrons were allowed to re-open in May 2021 but at the moment it is on a very limited basis due to the Covid restrictions on the number of people allowed to congregate indoors. Parade nights are limited to bubbles of thirteen cadets and three staff allowed on the squadron premises at any one time and this has necessitated a temporary reorganisation of activities until such time as it is possible to return to normal squadron operation.

### Headquarters Norfolk & Suffolk Wing

When the Headquarters of the Air Training Corps was originally established in 1941, they had direct contact with squadrons and committees on all service and training matters through Area Controllers who were later re-named District Inspecting Officers (DIO). This system continued until October 1948 when a reorganisation of the ATC introduced the establishment of Wing Headquarters around the country to look after the servicing and training of the ATC Squadrons. The Wing Headquarters establishment was to be based on the size of the Wing, those with over 600 cadets would have an RAFVR(T) Wing Commander as Commanding Officer and those with under 600 cadets would be commanded by a Squadron Leader. All Wings were to have a permanent administration office with a full-time regular RAF Flight Lieutenant as Adjutant supported by a small civilian clerical staff. This resulted in the Headquarters of Norfolk Wing being established on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1949 at RAF Old Catton under the command of Squadron Leader P. C. Utting. The Wing was officially inaugurated with a special service at Norwich Cathedral on Sunday, 15th May 1949, followed by a Wing parade and March Past where the Air Officer Commanding 61 Group, Air Commodore T. N. McEvoy CBE, took the salute.

A full-time RAF Flight Lieutenant was appointed as Adjutant for the new Norfolk Wing and together with his permanent administration staff, shared accommodation in the Station Headquarters of RAF Old Catton with No. 3620 Fighter Control Unit and Headquarters No. 6 Group Royal Observer Corps. Changes occurred in January 1951 when it was decided that the regular RAF Wing adjutants should return to their original duties and be replaced by a permanent civilian adjutant. Candidates for this new post were to be recently retired RAF officers, appointed to an RAFRO Class J Commission in the rank of Flight Lieutenant. On appointment they were required to report to Group Headquarters to meet the staff officers with responsibilities for the ATC, after which they were sent to Home Command for a week-long course concerning their duties as Wing Adjutants.



First Regular RAF Norfolk Wing Adjutant  
Name unknown



First Civilian Norfolk Wing Adjutant  
Flt Lt P J R King MA

The first civilian Adjutant for Norfolk Wing was Flight Lieutenant P. J. R. King MA, who was a recently retired RAF Group Captain. The post was eventually upgraded to Squadron Leader RAFRO (Class J) as part of the Morris Committee report in 1967. The Taylor Report was published in 1955 and this advocated that RAF Home Command should cease the administration and control of the Corps and that these duties should pass to a Commandant who would be responsible to the Air Ministry. It was also recommended that the responsibilities of the Wings should be increased to include local administration of squadrons under their control. In 1959 RAF Home Command was disbanded and Air Cadet responsibility was transferred for a short time to Flying Training Command. Then in May 1960, Headquarters Air Cadets was set up at RAF White Waltham as a separate formation for the organisation and direction of the Air Training Corps.

When the Morris Committee was set up on 1st April 1967 under the Chairmanship of Air Marshal Sir Douglas Morris KCB CBE DSO DFC, its ultimate objective was to review the organization, administration and training of the Air Training Corps. One of the stated aims of the Committee was to examine the existing Wing boundaries with the object of redefining them so as to create a reasonably standard Wing area throughout the United Kingdom. The intention was to ensure that the Wings so formed would comprise around twenty squadrons each. As a result of the deliberations of the Committee, the separate Wings of Suffolk and Norfolk were considered prime targets for reorganization. This eventually proved correct and during the summer of 1972 the two Wings were amalgamated to form the now well established Norfolk and Suffolk Wing. With the formation of the enlarged Wing, internal reorganization became inevitable and as a result the existing Suffolk Wing Headquarters in Ipswich was closed down. All responsibilities for the administration of the new Wing were transferred to the existing Norfolk Wing Headquarters at RAF Old Catton, which was subsequently redesignated Norfolk and Suffolk. Over the years the title of the head of the permanent administrative staff has changed from Adjutant and as they usually hold the rank of Squadron Leader they are now referred to as Wing Executive Officers.

To commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ATC the Wing initiated a Time Capsule Relay in which all Norfolk and Suffolk Squadrons could participate. The object of the exercise was that over a period of six months each squadron would place a unique item in the capsule and then come up with an inventive method of transportation to the next squadron. On completion of the relay the capsule would be buried at Wing Headquarters to be retrieved 25 years later on the 5<sup>th</sup> February 2041 to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the ATC.

The relay began its journey at 1087 (Downham Market) Squadron on the 10<sup>th</sup> April 2016 and during the Capsule's 6 month movement around the Wing it is estimated to have travelled in excess of 1000 miles in many different ways including Motorbike, Aircraft, Helicopter, Life Boat, Speed boat, Blue Light Emergency Vehicle and Wheelbarrow. It also visited X-ray Departments, RAF Marham, RAF Cranwell, as well as Wing and Corps events such as Wing Field, Corps Extravaganza and Wing Parade, as well as visiting two Weddings. 1249 (Dereham) Squadron were the last recipients of the capsule and they transported it to Wing Headquarters where it was buried on the 29<sup>th</sup> October 2016. After a short prayer by the Wing Chaplain Rev. Ron Tuck, Wing Commander D Miller MBE lowered the capsule watched by Squadron Leaders Kevin Green MBE, Jason Allan, Gale Jupe and the Wing Warrant Officer Trevor Bailey and Cadets and Staff from Norwich, Dereham, Felixstowe and Broadland Squadrons. The Capsule burial site at WHQ is marked by an engraved Marble plaque which was donated by Arthur Jary & Son.



Wg Cmdr D Miller MBE about to lower the Capsule



Marble plaque marking the capsule

All officers serving with the Air Cadet Organisation are volunteers and were originally commissioned in the RAFVR(T) but this has recently changed and they now receive a Royal Air Force Air Cadet (RAFAC) commission. The Commanding Officer of the Wing holds the rank of Wing Commander and is responsible for maintaining administration, training and policy liaison between all the Wing Squadrons and Headquarters Air Cadets. In addition to the permanent Wing Executive Officer and his clerical staff the Commanding Officer also has the assistance of several RAFAC Wing Staff Officers who undertake specific responsibilities. These duties vary from Sector Officers who are responsible for the general administration of squadrons within their area to other officers who are responsible for Training, Sports, Media, Radio, DofE, Shooting, First Aid etc. Also on the Wing staff in a volunteer capacity, are the Wing Chaplain, Wing Chairman and Wing Treasurer, who provide a focal point whereby Chaplains and Civilian Committees at squadron level can pass any specific problems they are unable to resolve for arbitration.

For the past fifty years both 231 Squadron and Norfolk & Suffolk Wing are the only two units remaining that were actually located on RAF Old Catton before it was closed in 1963. Both units are still situated on the only remaining piece of land that was part of the station and the Squadron building still contains the original WW2 RAF Coltishall Sector Operations Room which was reconstructed to provide an Assembly Hall and Cellar. The remaining area of land consisting of the squadron parade ground and a large grass activity area would originally have been occupied by the Station Headquarters, various office buildings, the Medical Centre and Guardroom.



Norfolk & Suffolk Wing and 231 Squadron Headquarters  
Situated on remaining area of RAF Old Catton

## Postscript

RAF Old Catton was a small autonomous station which was situated in the Norwich suburbs on Constitution Hill mid-way between the Norwich Municipal Aerodrome on Mousehold Heath and RAF Horsham St Faith. Although it was in existence for 25 years there are no official records available as to why it was originally constructed but with Chain Home RDF stations at RAF Stoke Holy Cross and West Beckham it is probable that it was originally constructed to be a Control and Reporting centre for them. From unofficial sources it appears to have been placed on a Care and Maintenance basis after completion although there may have been a Meteorological Section of 3 Group operating from there. It was not until early 1940 when the RAF Coltishall Operations Room re-located there that the station eventually became operational.

When RAF Horsham St Faith became a USAAF station in 1943 Fifers Lane with most of the land on its southern side was part of the station and the lane was closed to the general public with a Guardroom situated at its junction with the Cromer Road opposite what is now a small Tesco store. Because of the large number of USAAF personnel requiring accommodation an additional Barrack site consisting of Nissen and concrete BCF Huts was erected on the southern side of Fifers Lane close to St Faiths Road. These buildings were only a short distance from the centre of Old Catton village and almost opposite the Officers Mess which had the "Cat on the Barrel" village sign situated outside its main entrance. There were also several Military Units situated at Catton Hall and it is therefore conceivable that there may have been some confusion with the name Old Catton mentioned in some of the limited information sources available which imply RAF Old Catton but should have actually referred to RAF Horsham St Faith.



It is not known when RAF Old Catton officially became part of the USAAF 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force but this would probably have been just before the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing arrived in the UK in 1942. With the station now officially a USAAF base it was renamed Camp Thomas but for some reason this name never really took hold and after a few weeks it was always referred to as just Old Catton even in the few official records available. Over the years the station has become lost in the mists of time and if it is ever referred to nowadays it is usually only as the location of a nuclear bunker. Considering that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Wing, which eventually became the well known USAAF 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Division, was actually formed within the parish of Sprowston at RAF Old Catton it is surprising that its wartime activities have never been recognised.

Location of RAF Old Catton with respect to the existing Ring Road and housing development



Flight Lieutenant Fisher joined 231 (Crooks Place) Squadron as a ATC cadet in August 1945 and in April 1947 became a ground crew cadet with 102E Gliding School at RAF Horsham St Faith carrying out signalling and retrieve duties. After completing his solo Gliding Proficiency training and obtaining his British Gliding Association 'A' Certificate he became a Staff Cadet with the unit. He was the first Norfolk cadet to be given the opportunity to continue gliding training and in July 1948 obtained his BGA 'B' Certificate after completing a solo circuit of the airfield. As all training at that time was carried out in single seat gliders he was qualified to carry out the duties of a Junior Instructor.

After retirement he became Secretary of the Squadron Civilian Committee before finally retiring from the ATC environment in 1993. However he continued to retain an interest in the ATC by researching and writing the history of the Norwich squadron and in 2002 he was asked to produce a history of Norfolk and Suffolk Wing . In 2006 he was asked to assist 231 Squadron with a history project and this led to him returning to the unit as a Civilian Instructor where he is currently serving as the Squadron Radio Officer.

